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"The operetta seasons considerably decreased our losses": Art and business from Italian ledgers of the early 1900s

Matteo Paoletti (University of Bologna)

Italian operetta between 1875 and the 1930s has generally been framed by critics as a minor genre within an ebullient theatrical market that yet gained extensive recognition, due to the outstanding inspiration of its main opera composers, the prominence of the Italian music publishers, and–to a lesser extent–the business acumen of a handful of ruthless impresarios. Defined by the early 1900s Italian publicists as *piccola lirica* (*little lyric),* musicologists today apply the term to the almost 3,000 Italian titles of operetta to indicate a marginal commercial product subordinated to lyrical opera and one that was a peripheral satellite in the European constellation of operettas dominated by the French and Viennese.[1] Even when prominent composers like Ruggero Leoncavallo (*La jeunesse de Figaro*, 1908; *Malbruck*, 1910; *La reginetta delle rose*, 1912), Giacomo Puccini (*La Rondine*, 1917) or Pietro Mascagni (*Sì*, 1919) proved themselves in the genre, their efforts have alternately been considered a sly attempt to replicate their young successes in a more profitable and easier market or, slightly more charitably, 'a mere homage to operetta, in which the author preserved his operatic style.'[2]

Despite the controversial critical reception and the sometimes questionable aesthetic value, Italian light entertainment–and especially operetta, with its lavish staging, glittering costumes, rich

[1] In Italy, the subject has long been investigated from a celebrative rather than musicological perspective. Despite the early attempt by the costume designer Giuseppe Garuti (1868-1954) to write a comprehensive history of Italian operetta in several volumes, monographs are few (Sandro Massimini, ed., *Storia dell'operetta*, Milan: Ricordi, 1984) and concise (Giuliana Poggiali, *Breve storia dell'operetta*, Rome: Graf, 1981). The most recent publications include the passionate but sometimes anecdotical works by Waldimaro Fiorentino: *L'operetta italiana: Storia, analisi critica, aneddoti* (Bolzano: Catinaccio, 2006); *L'operetta è tutta italiana* (Bolzano: Catinaccio, 2020). On Garuti's production, see: Matteo Paoletti, "Il «Caramba» genovese: Pipein Gamba tra Teatro alla Scala e Carlo Felice", in *Teatro e teatralità a Genova e in Liguria. Drammaturghi, registi, attori, scenografi, impresari e organizzatori,* ed. Federica Natta (Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, 2014), 123-144.

[2] Claudio Casini, 'Ai margini. L'operetta italiana', in *Musica in scena. IV: Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, ed. Alberto Basso (Turin: Utet, 1995), 527.

companies, and specialized performers–became one of the backbones of the theatrical market until the late 1920s due to its popularity with audiences as well as its money-making capacity. In Italy, its commercial success allowed Italian operetta to move across the venue borders, eventually ending up in the Category I opera houses despite critics' bias against it. Crossing boundaries became even more pronounced in the early 1900s, when Italian operetta was increasingly exported to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil to sustain (and in some cases replace) the offerings of opera seasons. Italian works were therefore performed in two different contexts–Italy and South America–although these markets were highly interconnected. In the early twentieth century, in fact, the market for the Italian musical theatre industry was based on a mature international infrastructure that intertwined Europe and the Americas. The connection was especially tight between Italy and South America, where favourable migratory policies caused over one million Italians move to Argentina alone between 1901 and 1913 (with a record 127,348 in 1906),[3] and where an astonishing artistic flourishing earned Buenos Aires the moniker of 'the Paris of South America' for its vivid theatrical activity.[4] Drawing upon unpublished archival sources including ledgers, contracts, and administrative documentation, the present chapter reconstructs the economic importance of operetta for the sustainability of theatrical enterprises that operated between Italy and the Southern Atlantic routes in an age of deep transformations.

Operetta in Italy: the liberal take-off and the rise of light entertainment

During the government of Giovanni Giolitti (1897-1914), Italy underwent impressive changes in its social and economic structure. As a result of the 'liberal take-off,' wide areas of a historically agrarian country developed significant industrial power although the distribution of growth and

[3] Fernando Devoto, *Storia degli italiani in Argentina* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007), 241.

[4] In 1907 3.6 million theatre tickets were sold in a metropolis with 1.3 million inhabitants. The following year, the new Colón was inaugurated as the largest theatre in the world. Beatriz Seibel, *Historia del teatro argentino: Desde los rituales hasta 1930* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2002), 410; C. E. Benzecry, "An Opera House for the 'Paris of South America': Pathways to the Institutionalization of High Culture", *Theory and Society*, 43 (2014): 169–96.

wealth remained unequal.[5] Audience tastes and cultural consumption changed: the well-established monopoly of opera crumbled under the increasing competition of cinema and lighter stage offerings, including operetta.[6] Music publishers like Ricordi and Sonzogno reacted by submerging the market with new operas and between 1900 and 1915, 250 new titles were launched in Italy. However, despite massive press campaigns and expensive staging, most were relegated to short runs and a quick oblivion.[7] As opera became increasingly elitist,[8] the audience decided to 'go where they feel welcomed better, where they understand more easily, where they get bored less,' as the leader of the theatre managers association, Franco Liberati, declared during a congress organized to face the crisis of Italian musical theatre in 1923.[9] As in other European nations,[10] in Italy operetta, variety shows, cabaret, and other minor forms of musical theatre were becoming mass phenomena and the entertainment industry invested accordingly: in 1905 the publisher Suvini-Zerboni became a jointstock company specializing in operetta with a large share capital (L. 2,200,000).[11] Its solid financial ground and aggressive promotion strategy allowed the company to break down competition and become the market leader through a firm control of the production chain ranging from the score to the venues to the touring companies. Suvini-Zerboni's domain lasted until 1935, when the fascist regime under Mussolini dismantled the 'trust' through the arrest of Suvini-Zerboni's manager Paolo Giordani.[12] In the meantime, the titans Sonzogno and Ricordi had taken an interest in operetta and other minor publishers appeared as well and enjoyed significant

[5] Giuseppe Barone, "La modernizzazione italiana dalla crisi allo sviluppo", in *Storia d'Italia*, eds. Giovanni Sabbatucci and Vittorio Vidotto (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1995), vol. III, 256-370.
[6] Fiamma Nicolodi, "Il teatro lirico e il suo pubblico", in *Fare gli italiani*, eds. Simonetta Soldani and Gabriele Turi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), vol. I, 257-339.
[7] Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento* (Busto Arsizio: Bramante, 1985), vol. I, 53–99.
[8] Marco Santoro, "Imprenditoria culturale nella Milano di fine Ottocento: Toscanini, La Scala e la riforma dell'opera", in *L'Italia fin de siècle a teatro*, ed. Carlotta Sorba (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 101-47.
[9] *La Stampa*, 17 March 1923.
[10] *Singing Speech and Speaking Melodies: Minor Forms of Musical Theatre in the 18th and 19th Century*, eds. María Encina Cortizo and Michela Niccolai (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).
[11] Although comparing currencies in such different times is a risky endeavour, the 1905 share capital could be estimated in about 9,8 million Euros today.
[12] Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista – nuova edizione riveduta e aggiornata* (Milano: LED, 2004), 175-188.

commercial success.[13] After the extraordinary hit of *Il paese dei campanelli* (*The Land of Bells*, 1923), the composer Carlo Lombardo created his own publishing enterprise, and in its golden age his company managed up to 57 operetta ensembles between Europe and South America at the same time.[14]

Parodies, realness, and féeries across Italy: evolving trends of a successful genre

The origins of Italian operetta can be traced back to the early 1800s, when popular theatrical offerings including music and spoken parts were performed in regional vernaculars. However, it is the later influence of French and Viennese productions that was crucial to define the character of the genre in the country. Great importance has been accorded to the first Italian tour of the French 'Frères Grégoire' company, that started its performances in Parma on 2 October 1866.[15] A few years later, the sprawling network of the 'Politeama' theatres–popular and private venues that specialized in 'spettacoli d'arte varia' (variety shows)--regularly hosted operettas imported from France, along with traditional Italian operas, dramas, wrestling exhibitions, circus, and other minor and eclectic genres. The first Italian operettas appeared shortly after. They were often parodies in vernacular of foreign hits, such as Cletto Arrighi's *El Gran duca de Gerolstein* (1879), an adaptation in the Milanese dialect of Offenbach's *Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein*.

The Italian productive system of operetta acquired the character of a mature entertainment industry in 1901, when the first cooperative league of operetta artists appeared in Genoa. By this point, major companies such as those of Giulio Marchetti, Luigi Maresca, and Carlo Lombardo offered 'smooth staging, greater elegance and splendid costumes, often by the designer Luigi Sapelli, who

[13] Marco Capra, 'La Casa Editrice Sonzogno tra giornalismo e impresariato', in *Casa Musicale Sonzogno: Cronologie, saggi, testimonianze*, eds. Mario Morini and Piero Ostali Jr (Milano: Sonzogno, 1995), vol. I, 243-290; Stefano Baia Curioni, *Mercanti dell'Opera. Storie di Casa Ricordi* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2011).
[14] Fiorentino, *L'operetta italiana*, 242.
[15] Gaspare Nello Vetro, *Il Teatro Reinach. Gli spettacoli musicali: opere, concerti, operette* (Parma: Comune di Parma, 1995), 13.

earned international renown under the pseudonym Caramba.'[16] Italian companies based their repertoire on operettas composed by native authors, performed along with 'light' operas by Donizetti and Rossini (e.g. *L'elisir d'amore* or *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and trending titles of the French, Viennese, and English operettists were often adapted, albeit in unreliable translations. In some cases, those companies toured under the name of 'Compagnie di opere comiche' to clarify that their offerings included light repertoire, which was generally not performed by regular opera companies and main opera houses. In Italy, the most successful productions often assumed the character of the 'Rivista' (revue), which relied heavily on spoken parts and satire rather than a cohesive musical structure. One of the best examples of these compositions is Renato Simoni's *Turlupineide* (1908), in which the future librettist of Puccini's *Turandot* satirized both Italian politics and national dress. The enduring hit did not feature original music but was rather a pastiche of popular tunes from other operettas. *Turlupineide* entered the repertoire of the most important musical theatre companies of the time, including Marchetti's and Scognamiglio's.

The success of Renato Simoni's work emphasized one of the peculiarities of Italian operetta: the importance of realism as a leading theme of the librettos. However, when *Turlupineide* was sold to the main opera house in Rome, the Teatro Costanzi, Luigi Zerboni wrote 'that no-one can deny its character of féerie,' perhaps to avert any risk of censorship: Simoni's libretto, in fact, included explicit satire of leading politicians, including a parody of prime minister Giovanni Giolitti[17]. Despite its rampant success, operetta could be performed in Italian opera houses only under certain circumstances for cultural and economic reasons. When the Kingdom of Italy was created in 1861, the country assumed the management of historical theatrical venues that belonged to the previous States and in which operatic tradition was entrenched. The maintenance of these buildings and the expenses for theatrical activity soon became a burden for the young national state. Therefore,

[16] Carlotta Sorba, "The origins of the entertainment industry: the operetta in the late nineteenth-century Italy", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, n. 11 (2006): 293-294.
[17] Archivio Storico Capitolino, Rome, *Società Teatrale Internazionale* (from now on: ASC, *STIN*), b. 1, f. 3. Letter of Luigi Zerboni, 3 July 1909.

between 1865 and 1867, the Parliament transferred their property to municipalities, leaving local authorities the choice whether to support them with a *dote* (grant) or to leave them closed. In period known for a 'governmental indifference' towards theatrical matters, the latter often prevailed.[18] Subsidization was generally tied to the production of traditional and non-commercial offerings. This meant that only opera seasons and selected spoken theatre performances were programmed. Impresarios working in Category I opera houses thus had to choose whether to accept the grant and renounce more popular genres that were increasingly in demand (like operetta) or waive public funding and rely only on the box-office revenues. The choice was risky but by the early 1900s operetta became a constant presence in the main Italian opera houses and the first boundary of venues was crossed. Shortly after a much wider border crossing would follow, making operetta a leading genre also in South America.

Operetta in South America: the case of 'Cono Sur'

The turn of the twentieth century saw relentless economic growth in South America. Especially in the 'Cono Sur' ('Southern Cone'), that is, the region including Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, the most advanced areas could now compete with Europe and the United States in terms of wealth and cultural consumption.[19] Massive migration flows fuelled the process: the millions of Italian citizens expatriated as a part of a national strategy that 'conceived emigration in terms of political hegemony', and Italy's government aimed to make of Argentina 'a new and greater Italy […] for mercantile and industrial expansionism.'[20] Migrant communities in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo constituted a large audience for theatrical productions from Europe, and a handful of impresarios from Italy, Spain, France, and Portugal firmly controlled the transatlantic routes, the circulation of companies, and their repertoire through sometimes shady and underhanded

[18] Livia Cavaglieri, *Il sistema teatrale. Storia dell'organizzazione, dell'economia e delle politiche del teatro in Italia* (Rome: Dino Audino, 2021), 40-42.
[19] Beatriz Seibel, *Historia del teatro argentino: Desde los rituales hasta 1930* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2002), 381.
[20] Emilio Gentile, "L'emigrazione italiana in Argentina nella politica di espansione del nazionalismo e del Fascismo", *Storia contemporanea*, vol. 3 (1986): 357.

agreements with the local authorities.[21] In 1919, the Opéra Comique manager Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi stated: "Italians are indeed, in contemporary music, what the Genoese were on the seas in the feudal times: they have the keys of the world market in the universal theatrical business."[22] Some years earlier, Lugné-Poe (the leader of the Le Théâtre de l'Œuvre), and the actress Suzanne Desprès had faced the unprejudiced business strategies of some Spanish and Portuguese impresarios in Buenos Aires; in his memoir, Lugné-Poe reflected on their position in the development of the Argentine market and repertoire and described himself as a victim of a 'cartel of theatre owners.'[23]

As in Italy, operetta held a special place in the South American seasons, mainly for its money-making capacity. European impresarios included operetta, zarzuela, and revue performances in their seasons as a way to balance the budget at home and offset the costs of operas and dramas through box office sales. To increase demand, Italian operettas were sometimes translated into Spanish and adapted to the local taste. The parodic tradition, which held such an important place in the Italian market, bloomed there as well, with titles like Luigi Dall'Argine's *El crepuscolo de un Dios* (*The Twilight of a God*) or Vincenzo Di Napoli-Vita's *1913*, that satirized the endeavours of European impresarios competing to conquer the Latin American theatrical market. Both operettas debuted in Montevideo in 1913 and, as we are about to see, granted large revenues to their producer, the Italian impresario Walter Mocchi.

Inside the ledgers

Ledgers and administrative records of the enterprises offer us a fascinating overview of how the scene evolved in Italy and in South America, making operetta a genre able to cross boundaries in terms of venues and continents. Almost none of the archives of the hundreds of private theatres that

[21] Matteo Paoletti, "La red de empresarios europeos en Buenos Aires (1880-1925). Algunas consideraciones preliminares", *Revista Argentina de Musicología*, vol. 21 (2020): 51-76.
[22] Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi, Guerre et Théâtre (Berger-Levrault, 1919), 316.
[23] Lugné Poe, *La Parade. Sous les etoiles. Souvenirs de théâtre (1902-1912)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), 248.

operated in Italy in the early 1900s have survived: the touring character of Italian theatrical enterprises, their generally narrow financial dimension, along with the ephemeral nature of most of the documentation, did not help with preservation. If the items with explicit monetary and artistic value (such as costumes, billboards, sketches, scripts, paraphernalia) were sometimes collected, the administrative and every-day documentation almost disappeared. However, testimonies to the ebullient theatrical activity of operetta companies may be traced in the archives of the entities that produced the shows. Municipal archives and Chamber of Commerce sources are particularly promising in this regard.

On 1st January 1904 Giulio Marchetti, 'director and owner of the *Compagnia d'operette e d'opere comiche* under his name,' signed a contract to perform from 1905 to 1912 in the most prestigious venue in Italy's capital city, the Teatro Costanzi, currently Teatro dell'Opera di Roma.[24] Marchetti's operetta company was one of the richest of the time and its lavish staging could easily compete with most of the operatic ensembles an average impresario could gather. The contract is significant for its exceptional duration: originally, the agreement was made for a seven year period; then, in 1906, the impresario Vincenzo Morichini extended the deal through 1920 for a total of fifteen years. The provision is peculiar, considering that the usual duration of theatrical contracts in Italy was three years. Marchetti's contract bound him to perform in Rome during the Spring and Autumn seasons, that is, in the periods that were not subsidized by the municipality. From June to September, the company moved to South America to exploit the austral winter and the rich theatrical seasons organized in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and in the minor cities that constituted a tremendous network for the circulation of European theatrical production abroad.[25] In 1910 Marchetti's contract was once again revised by the new owner of the Costanzi, the limited

[24] ASC, *STIN*, b. 1, f. 1.

[25] The phenomenon was studied by the pioneering works of John Rosselli: "The Opera Business and the Italian Immigrant Community in Latin America 1820–1930: The Example of Buenos Aires", *Past & Present*, 127 (1990): 155–82; "Latin America and Italian Opera: A Process of Interaction, 1810–1930", *Revista de musicologia*, 16 (1993): 139–45. For an updated overview: Aníbal Enrique Cetrangolo, *Ópera, barcos y banderas: El melodrama y la migración en Argentina (1880–1920)* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2015).

company Società Teatrale Internazionale (STIN), that subscribed the operetta company from 20 December 1911 to 20 February 1912, the traditional Carnival opera season. This meant that, when it came to the management of a main opera house, the investors of one of the largest theatrical enterprises in Italy decided to renounce opera and the municipal grant and to bet on the higher revenues of operetta. In the new contract with the STIN, Marchetti agreed to give 'an uninterrupted run of evening performances, doubling in the festive days,' and to stage 'at least ten titles, two of which new to Rome.' No free days were planned. The orchestra, lighting, taxes, and press campaign were provided by the STIN, while Marchetti should guarantee the rest. In return, he obtained 65% of the gross revenues (80% on some special nights) and signed a non-compete clause for Rome. Another contract preserved in the STIN's archive, this time with Suvini-Zerboni, confirms the power of the operetta industry. In April 1907, the impresarios Morichini and Luigi Zerboni closed an agreement for two of the leading companies of the time, the Città di Milano and Città di Genova, with clauses similar to the ones of Marchetti's. From 1908 to 1912 Suvini-Zerboni–who had recently earned the exclusive rights for *The Merry Widow*–guaranteed that their rich ensembles, populated by renowned singing stars wearing Caramba's glamorous costumes, would perform exclusively at the Costanzi in selected periods. In exchange, the publisher obtained 70% of gross box office revenues.[26]

The conditions described in the contracts–particularly the high percentages for the companies–may appear quite unbalanced in favor of theatre owners. However, their effectiveness was proven when the STIN took over the Costanzi in 1908.[27] Established with a large share capital of L. 2,000,000 provided by some of the most important individuals in Italian theatre, the joint-stock company was an emblem of the industrialization of the Italian theatrical system. The shareholders included the publishers Renzo and Edoardo Sonzogno, the senator and director of the Accademia di Santa

[26] ASC, *STIN*, b. 1, f. 3. In November 1908 the STIN managed to reduce the percentage to 67%.
[27] Matteo Paoletti, *Mascagni, Mocchi, Sonzogno. La Società Teatrale Internazionale (1908–1931) e i suoi protagonisti* (Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Bologna, 2015), https://doi.org/10.6092/unibo/amsacta/4235.

Cecilia (Enrico di San Martino), the impresario of the Teatro San Carlo of Naples (Roberto de Sanna), the president of the Teatro alla Scala (Uberto Visconti di Modrone), as well as an Argentine company, the Sociedad Teatral Ítalo-Argentina (STIA), that guaranteed the circulation of artists and productions between the two hemispheres. The establishment of the STIN was promoted by Walter Mocchi (1871-1955), a journalist and socialist revolutionary who entered the business of opera after marrying the noted soprano Emma Carelli.[28] For the first three decades of the twentieth century, he ran the most prestigious venues in Italy and South America and earned himself the unflattering moniker of 'Buffalo Bill of Italian impresarios abroad.'[29] Shortly after its establishment, the STIN controlled several main opera houses and concert halls in Italy (the Teatro Regio in Turin, the Teatro Regio in Parma, the Carlo Felice in Genoa, the Argentina and the Adriano in Rome, and the Petruzzelli in Bari) and, through STIA, seven of the nine Category I theatres in Buenos Aires (Colón, Circo Arena, Coliseo, Odeón, Avenida, Costitución, Victoria), the Ópera and the Olimpo in Rosario, and several theatres in Chile, including the Socrates in Valparaíso and the 'Municipals' in Concepción, Santiago, and Talca. Even though the speculative nature of the STIN was manifest, its creation was hailed as a cultural rebirth for the troubled Italian theatre industry. The STIN's first season included the Roman premiere of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Teatro Costanzi, 29 March 1909) and the world premieres of Franco Alfano's *Il Principe Zilah* (Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa, 3 February 1909), and Italo Montemezzi's *Héllera* (Teatro Regio, Turin, 17 March 1909). However, all these operas failed, putting the endeavour at risk.

When Alfano's *Zilah* debuted in Genoa with lavish costumes and expensive scenery, the audience was lacking. The same night, on the other side of the street, a crowd was attending Leslie Stuart's

[28] Matteo Paoletti, *«A huge revolution of theatrical commerce». Walter Mocchi and the Italian musical theatre business in South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[29] 'Mascagni e Walter Mocchi alle mani', La Stampa, 15 March 1923. The moniker was given by Pietro Mascagni, who belonged to Mocchi's roster until 1922. The impresario had produced some of Mascagni's new operas, such as *Isabeau* (1911) and *Il piccolo Marat* (1921), had engaged him as manager of the Costanzi (1909-10) and since the early 1900s had made of him a constant presence as a conductor in his South American venues. However, the fellowship broke out when Mocchi replaced Mascagni with Richard Strauss during the 1922 Argentine tour.

Florodora at the popular Politeama Regina Margherita. 'People preferred the gay operetta to the severe art', pronounced a critic, clarifying that 'the audience is wary of a new that deceived the public too many times, and for which it feels no transport at all.'[30] Alfano's new work earned L. 4,687.75, a return insufficient even to cover the rental of scenery (2,400) and score (L. 3,000),[31] and it was cancelled after four nights. The following productions also failed, and despite the generous municipal grant of L. 92,962.50 the theatre closed with a loss of L. 28,070.65. The *dote* could not save the opera season in Genoa nor in the other cities: in April 1909, the STIN's financial sheet marked provisional liabilities for L. 305,560.09. The company would have been bankrupted if not for operetta.

The apparently disadvantageous contract with Suvini-Zerboni became a lifesaver. In Autumn and Spring, the companies Città di Milano and Città di Genova performed intensive runs of *opere comiche* at the Costanzi, including Viennese operettas given in Italian, the Roman premiere of *The Merry Widow*, English classics such as Sidney Jones's *The Geisha*, and féeries like Simoni's *Turlupineide* and *La polvere di Pirlimpinpin* (*The Powder of Pirlimpinpin*) by Carlo Lombardo, who also served as the conductor. Despite the absence of any public funding and the 67% of gross box office revenues granted to Suvini-Zerboni, these seasons of light entertainment offset the costs of the entire house and minimized its liabilities to L. 10,740.17. 'The two operetta seasons […] considerably decreased our losses', admitted the STIN's management report.[32] The successful experiment foreshadowed the replacement of subsidized opera with operetta in Italy and abroad.

The success of Suvini-Zerboni's ensembles was due to their capacity for popularizing musical theatre without compromising the artistic quality of the houses where they played. The Città di Genova had an orchestra of thirty-six players, a singing chorus of fifty-five, and a dance troupe of

[30] 'L'opera nuova del maestro Franco Alfano', *Corriere Mercantile*, 4 February 1909.
[31] ASC, *STIN*, b. 15, f. 4.
[32] ASC, *STIN*, b. 5, f. 1.

eighteen, while the Città di Milano showcased scenery by the Teatro alla Scala painter Antonio Rovescalli and had as a star Emma Vecla (1877–1972), the French soprano responsible for the success of *The Merry Widow's* Italian premiere. Both companies featured the lavish costumes of Caramba. The ledgers testify to the astonishing financial performance of these companies; compared to the general revenues of the opera season–including the municipal grant–a single run by Città di Milano produced 43.01% of the Carnival season, without any public funding and sustained only by the box-office. This result was made possible by the public that flooded the opera house for the operetta season, a novelty the critics did not completely appreciate. When *The Geisha* was staged in Italian, the socialist journal *Avanti!* commented on the extraordinary success:

> The turnout of the public had increased enormously, even due to a certain decrease in price. The crowd in the gallery, after having enjoyed some encores during the first two acts, demanded more […]. A certain kind of audience–especially one for the *Geisha*–is not used to theatrical conventions.[33]

The conservative *Giornale d'Italia* replied:

> I believe it never happened before that a performance had to be interrupted due to the excessive enthusiasm of the audience […]. To calm the overly extreme admiration of the people sitting in the gallery, it would be enough, I suppose, to double the ticket prices and the guards.[34]

[33] *Avanti!*, 16 October 1908. "L'affluenza del pubblico era aumentata fino all'enormità, anche per una certa diminuzione di prezzo. Ma la folla che gremiva particolarmente il loggione, dopo aver ottenuto molti bis durante i due primi atti, ne impose parecchi […]. Una convenienza a cui il pubblico – specie per la «Geisha» - non è molto abituato". (Translation author's own here and following)

[34] *Giornale d'Italia*, 16 October 1908. "Credo non sia mai avvenuto che si sia dovuta interrompere una rappresentazione per l'eccessivo entusiasmo del pubblico […]. Per domare alquanto l'espansiva ammirazione dei frequentatori della piccionaia, basterebbe, suppongo, raddoppiare il biglietto d'ingresso e le guardie."

An analysis of the box office records of the Costanzi demonstrates that the audience was smaller than the critics or the proceeds suggest.[35] Although tickets for operetta were actually cheaper than those for opera, it did not necessarily mean that the audience increased. In the Costanzi in the early 1910s a *poltrona* (stall seat) for operetta shifted from L. 4 to L. 5.50 (compared to L. 15 to 25 for opera), while a box cost L.15 to 25 depending on the tier (L. 50 to 200 for opera). Gallery was of course cheaper for both genres, decreasing from L. 3-5 for opera to the minimum of L. 0.5-1 for operetta. However, box office records show that the cheap and popular gallery was often empty, and the audience clearly preferred the more expensive options. This trend was common to opera and operetta. The real difference stood in the season tickets: in the operetta seasons box office receipts counted for 96% and season tickets for 2.51%, whereas for the opera season these figures were 35% and 39%. In both cases, box office revenues were sustained by the average consumption of the stalls.

Figure 1 illustrates this disparity. At the Città di Milano, the premiere of Lehár's *Eva* (18 October 1913) recorded 624 stall entrances and 288 seats sold for an income of L. 2,232, while the receipts of boxes counted for L. 775 (respectively 65% and 22% of box office revenues). Only 83 of the 600 tickets available for the gallery were sold, for an income of L. 83. The grand opening of the 1912 Carnival season with Wagner's *Siegfried* had similar percentages: stall entrances and seats counted for L. 7,330 and boxes for L. 1,960 (respectively 56% and 21% of box office revenues). The popular *loggione* had a much worse performance for Lehár than for Wagner, since the latter sold 244 gallery tickets compared to 83. Even during the run of the popular *Turlupineide* in June 1912, only 174 gallery tickets were sold, providing 7% of revenues to the Città di Milano. Clearly, the audience still preferred the more expensive seats. If it is not possible to assign a direct social characterization to these data, their divergence from the press descriptions is significant.

[35] The following data are an author's elaboration from the records preserved in ASC, *STIN*, b. 39, f. 1-12.

	Eva **(premiere 18 October 1913)**		***Siegfried*** **(premiere 26 December 1912)**		***Turlupineide*** **(reprise – 30 June 1912)**	
	Tickets (number)	*Revenue (Lire)*	*Tickets (number)*	*Revenue (Lire)*	*Tickets (number)*	*Revenue (Lire)*
Stall	624	936	556	2,780	277	277
Seats	288	1,296	182	4,550	71	284
Gallery	83	83	244	732	174	87
Boxes	35	775	14	1,960	18	240

Figure 1: Comparison of box office revenues at Città di Milano, 1912-1913

The difference in pricing between opera and operetta was less remarkable in South America.[36] In 1910 Ernesto Lahoz's 'Grande compagnia italiana di operette e opere comiche,' featuring the operetta composer Luigi dall'Argine as conductor, performed in the Theatro São José of São Paulo, Brazil with ticket prices that did not substantially differ from those charged by the Theatro Municipal for the famed 'Compagnia lirica italiana' conducted by Giorgio Polacco. If a box at the opera house was undoubtedly more expensive (35-50 Reais vs 25-30), the prices for the stall seats

[36] The following analysis is based on the billboards published by the Brazilian newspaper *Correio Paulistano* in the year 1910.

(5 vs 3.5) and the ones for the gallery (3.5 vs 1.5) were similar. In some cases, attending German operetta performances could be even more expensive than opera: in June 1910, a box at the Theatro São José for the ensemble of August Papke performing Leo Fall's *A Divorciada* (*The Divorcée*) cost 80 Reais, while a box for *Aida* at the Municipal cost 50 at the most. Of course, only European companies could stand those pricing policies. For instance, when a local ensemble staged *The Geisha* at the Polytheama (Campinas) directly after Lahoz's run at the Theatro São José, its prices were much cheaper than the ones for the Italian company: a box for the Brazilian production cost 6 Reais instead of 30, and a stall seat could be bought for 1 Real instead of 3.

During the same period, renowned drama companies imported from Italy, like that of Angelo Musco, performed in São Paulo with ticket prices aligned with the pricing of operetta. In Argentina and Brazil boundaries among genres, as well as prices, were much more fluid than in Europe and, especially in the most popular venues, impresarios often offered operetta along with other light entertainment, from revue to wrestling exhibitions, to offset overall production costs. One of the most successful genres, often presented in alternation with operetta, was Spanish *zarzuela*, whose tradition was vibrant in South America at the time.[37] In 1909 Mocchi engaged the famed *zarzuela* company of Emiliano Sagi Barba for a tour in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. The following year, Sagi Barba performed in João Cateysson's Brazilian venues with a mixed repertoire: in São Paulo he staged Franz Lehár's *La Princesa del Dollar* (*The Dollar Princess*) and Ramos Carrión's *zarzuela La bruja* (*The Witch*), with equal success and positive press reviews.

A precarious balance for a successful genre

Because the visual feasts offered by artists like Caramba and Rovescalli had become compulsory to please the Italian public, operetta, like its cousin opera, evolved into an expensive and risky

[37] Kristen McCleary, 'Mass, Popular, and Elite Culture? The Spanish Zarzuela in Buenos Aires, 1890–1900', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, n. 21 (2002): 1–27.

business, an endeavour whose increasing costs could hardly be offset by unpredictable revenues. Shows with dozens of dancers, musicians, stagehands, and singers could only be produced by enterprises with large financial backing and a ruthless industry strategy. Since operetta companies could only rely on box office revenues a constant audience flow was necessary, and to keep the public's interest, producers invested heavily in new titles in the quest to replace one success with another. The practice soon became unsustainable. Experienced impresarios like Giovanni Chiarella, owner of the unsubsidized Politeama Genovese, denounced to the Mayor of Genoa

> the many difficulties that we encounter especially nowadays in arranging convenient performances, given the considerable costs of the scores, the fabulous wages required by the renowned singers, and the high orchestral, choral, and dancing expenses etc. And last but not least the excessive governmental and municipal taxes of all kinds that weigh on these very difficult enterprises, while the public participation is so unpredictable.[38]

The system was precarious and, in many cases, led to the sudden dissolution even of leading companies. Directly after the 1909 success of the Città di Genova at the Costanzi, Suvini-Zerboni's manager wrote to the STIN's administrator:

> And in all confidentiality, I tell you that the dissolution of the Città di Genova has not yet been absolutely decided. This would happen if things do not settle down and we don't find an agreement for the Autumn season next year. You are too practical in this business not to understand that a second *Turlupineide* cannot be

[38] Archivio Storico Comunale, Genoa, *Amministrazione Municipale 1910-1940*, b. 39/9, f. *Teatro Carlo Felice: appalti vari per la gestione e l'esercizio del teatro 1910-13*, Letter of 4 September 1910. "tante altre difficoltà che s'incontrano specialmente al giorno d'oggi nell'approntare spettacoli convenienti, stante i fortissimi noli degli spartiti, per le favolose paghe richieste dai rinomati Artisti, e per le forti spese orchestrali, corali e danzanti ecc. e non ultime le eccessive tasse Governative e Municipali d'ogni genere che gravano su tali Esercizi tanto difficili, mentre il concorso del pubblico è così aleatorio."

found and that the season would certainly end in disaster for you as well as for us.[39]

At times, the earning spree of successful companies in South America led to the breach of contracts when more profitable opportunities appeared on the horizon. A letter delivered from Buenos Aires on 8 August 1909 to the management of the Costanzi is an exemplary testimony: 'Giulio Marchetti instructs me to communicate that he decided to extend his tour in America […] and renounce his Autumn season in Rome', wrote the company administrator, explaining that the operetta ensemble would break up the rich contract for Italy to exploit the even richer South American success.[40] Mocchi immediately capitalized on the new balance between the shores of the Atlantic and the potential of operetta as a money-making genre in the West. In 1910 the impresario acquired exclusive rights to Giulio Marchetti's and the Scognamiglio–Caramba companies[41] and compelled them to perform in never-ending tours between South America (where they spent most of their time) and Italy. Under the aegis of Mocchi's La Teatral, in 1913 the two companies merged to become the Compagnia Italiana d'Opera Comica, a huge corporation that could guarantee more cost-effective productions, rich scenery, exclusive rights, and leading singers including the acclaimed Tina Ghirelli, Maria Ivanisi, Giulia Bassi, Janka Chaplinska, and Giuseppe Zoffoli.

Mocchi celebrated his entrepreneurial success by producing a brand-new operetta, *1913*. Written by Vincenzo Di Napoli-Vita and performed at his Coliseo Theatre in Buenos Aires, the satiric production featured a caricature of Mocchi himself struggling with his competitors to take control

[39] ASC, STIN, b. 1, f. 3, Letter of Francesco Ambrosini to Gino Rossetti, 31 July 1909. "Ed in via tutta riservata, ti dico che non è ancora deciso in via assoluta, lo scioglimento della compagnia Città di Genova, la quale sarebbe precisamente destinata nel caso non si accomodassero le cose, di venire a fare la stagione autunnale il venturo anno. Ora tu sei troppo pratico d'affari per non comprendere che una seconda *Turlupineide* non si può pescare e che la stagione si risolverebbe certamente in un disastro tanto per voi quanto per noi."

[40] ASC, *STIN*, b. 1, f. 1.

[41] ASC, *STIN*, b. 4, f. 4.

of the South American market, with the obvious outcome of La Teatral winning the competition.[42] The impresario confirmed his heavy investment in operetta when he tapped the composer-conductor Luigi Dall'Argine to lead his companies. During the 1913 season, the author of the popular *Dall'ago al milione* (*From Rags to Riches*) conducted the hits of Lecocq, Audran, Lehár, and Oscar Straus in the Solìs Theatre of Montevideo, while composing the parody *El crepuscolo de un Dios* for the Teatro Real of the Uruguayan capital city.

The market was changing, and the Argentine and Brazilian governments had begun to sustain the development of national opera repertoires through generous subsidies in an echo of the earlier Italian practice. South American intellectual circles decried European theatrical production, claiming that the American 'peoples, politically independent from Europe–and sometimes also economically–remain its colonies in the artistic order.'[43] As the tastes of the public changed, the golden age of operetta in South America faded, and its huge expenses could no longer be sustained. In 1923 the rich Italian operetta company of the impresario Salvati, with 83 artists, was abandoned in Buenos Aires with no money nor returning tickets after the failure of the enterprise. Only the intervention of the composer Carlo Lombardo could pay the debts and bring the company back home.[44] If the Atlantic routes kept on delivering Italian artists to South America, the expensive gaiety and glitz of operetta at home were replaced by the cheaper laughter of *Rivista* and the drama companies sustained by Mussolini's regime, who tried to use the performing arts as a tool for cultural diplomacy[45]. Only Ettore Petrolini, Luigi Pirandello, and a handful of other gifted European

[42] José Ignacio Weber, Lucía Martinovich, and Pedro Camerata, "Itinerari di compagnie liriche italiane attraverso le città del litorale fluviale argentino (1908–1910)", in *I fiumi che cantano. L'opera italiana nel bacino del Rio de la Plata*, eds. Aníbale Enrique Cetrangolo and Matteo Paoletti (Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum, 2021).

[43] Hipólito Carambat, "El teatro en Buenos Aires", *Martín Fierro*, n. 3 (15 April 1924). The journal was published in Buenos Aires from 1924 to 1927, defined itself the voice of a 'new generation', and included intervention by leading intellectuals like Jorge Luís Borges.

[44] *Corriere della Sera*, 3 June 1923.

[45] Matteo Paoletti, "«A single purpose: the conquest of the foreign art markets»: Theatre and cultural diplomacy in Mussolini's Italy (1919-1927)", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 38, No 3 (2022): 201-21.

artists were still able to withstand the competition with the *Compañías Nacionales* that in the 1920s vindicated the mature independence of the South American market[46].

In this shifting perspective, Italian operetta lost the audience appeal that had sustained it for decades and was increasingly replaced in both Italy and South America with different genres that better matched public or political demand. Nevertheless, from an historical point of view, the golden age of Italian operetta proved the capacity of the genre to cross boundaries of time and space, moving from secondary theatres to Category I opera houses, from the shores of Italy to the Rio de la Plata, conveying trends and taste of an evolving globalized society.

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[46] Osvaldo Pellettieri (ed.), *Historia del teatro argentino ed Buenos Aires. La emancipación cultural (1884-1930)* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2002).

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